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ABSTRACT

The term "peer" is often used to mean both tutor and tutee, but writing center directors should avoid romanticizing the notion of peer tutoring and recognize that peer tutors are considerably more advanced, and therefore more "powerful", than their tutees. In fact, the question of difference between tutors and tutees is a vital one for writing centers. The term "peer tutors" assumes an equality between tutor and client and a lessening of tutee anxiety, but upon investigation of writing centers, the notion of peer tutor changes when the issue of power is addressed. Calling both instructor and client "peers" ignores the very real differences between them. In many writing centers, for example, little or no attention is paid to the listening skills needed by clients whose backgrounds differ greatly from the tutor's. For example, some tutors have difficulty with clients who demonstrate an inability to use Standard English. Thus, it is essential that tutor training courses emphasize increasing the tutors' awareness of such differences along with an understanding of their place in various cultural contexts. To begin with, instructors should acknowledge that tutors are chosen because they are advanced members of a specific discourse community. In order to aid tutors in understanding their place within the community, one university's writing center chose Peter Elbow's "What Is English?" (1990) as a core text, selecting it because of the multiple voices that speak from its pages and express the conflicts that confront both instructors and students as they struggle to teach and learn within an imperfect system. Work is also being done to find strategies that enable tutors and clients to work together in such a way that clients can learn Standard English without getting bogged down in lectures on grammar. In short, by conceiving the writing center as discourse community, potential tutors can examine what it is that makes it so and can consider what should be their own role within it. (Contains 17 references.) (HB)

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In "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing," Joseph Harris examines the current use of the term community in academia; in particular he critiques the meaning that Donald Bartholomae suggests in his article "Inventing the University." Harris argues that there is a tension that runs throughout that essay because community becomes a meta-term—hypothetical and suggestive, powerful yet ill-defined. Like community, peer has become a meta-term, one that is often used without much thought being given to the differences among those whom we might classify as peers. When those of us who employ peer, i.e. student, tutors fail to recognize how difference shapes both tutors and tutees, we cannot expect to break down the hierarchy that exists between them, a hierarchy that prevents many tutees from obtaining their goals, in particular becoming more fluent in academic discourse. We, as instructor and writing center directors, should avoid romanticizing the notion of peer tutoring and should instead strive toward a more specific and material view of it, one that recognizes that tutors are further advanced than tutees in achieving membership in the various academic discourse communities.

For many students, especially those from disadvantaged socioeconomic classes and/or diverse cultural backgrounds, learning to speak the language of the various discourse communities within a university can prove to be an extremely difficult task. Yet, if they are to succeed in the educational system as it now exists, they must learn to do so. For that reason, the question of difference among students, in particular between peer tutors and their clients, is a vital one for many writing centers. For these centers, the term peer tutor has come to be synonymous

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with student tutor, as if being at the undergraduate level somehow equalizes everyone. Envisioning students tutors as *peers* includes the assumption that their knowledge is only slightly more advanced than the clients and that they are not expected to have all the answers for them. And in employing peer tutors, educators are attempting to promote collaborative learning processes, a sound pedagogical practice that deserves encouragement. We expect, by having peers work together, the pressure or apprehension that clients may feel when seeking help from a instructor may cease to exist. We assume students who may be afraid to ask questions in class, because they fear being labeled as "dumb," will be able to talk to a tutor without risk. We see tutor and client as a team working together, both of them learning from the other, although often this relationship does not develop.

When we begin to examine the Writing Center as a discourse community with all its various levels, the notion of peer tutoring changes because the issue of power must be addressed. Consider which students are most likely to become peer tutors—students who are already comfortable with the system, having achieved a high rate of success within it. They are most likely to either seek out a position as a peer tutor or to be sought after by those in positions of authority to become one. However, it is students struggling within this system who are most likely to seek help from tutors in the writing center. To simply put such students together in a tutor/client relationship and call them *peers* ignores the differences between them, differences that are likely to simply reassert already existing positions of privilege.

When we do acknowledge that student tutors have power, it is most likely to be thought of as a beneficial and benevolent type. We think of tutors as having the "power" to help clients become better writers; rarely do we acknowledge that the tutors' "power" also exists in other forms. Tutors are powerful because, as upper level students, they are well on their way to achieving membership in a specialized discourse community (generally English). Tutors are powerful because

they have learned the language of their community and gained the knowledge needed to become "experts" in writing. It is for these reasons that they are selected to become tutors. So, by conceptualizing the Writing Center as a discourse community which clients must attempt to enter, we can begin to create strategies for training tutors that will enable them to successfully work with clients.

At my university, the Writing Center works with a wide range of clients. We support graduate students writing their thesises, help ESL students become more fluent, aid business majors working on resumes, but our largest number of clients are underprepared students. Unlike, the "traditional" student who enters this university, these students do not meet the "standard" university admissions criteria, and most of them are not at a first-year college level in either their writing or reading skills. Therefore, the Writing Center plays an extremely important role in retaining these students, enabling them to obtain a college degree when they otherwise might not have done so. Unfortunately, the old tutor training course failed to prepare tutors to work with at-risk students. While good listening and communication skills were stressed and various study skill strategies were offered, the course was designed with an idealized notion of peer in mind. Tutors fully expected to work with students just like themselves, perhaps spending a pleasant hour discussing the difficulty of truly appreciating Shakespeare or something else along that line. Little attention was paid to listening to or communicating with a client who was *unlike* the tutor. Because it had been assumed that all students were pretty much alike, the question of how difference was going to affect tutor/client relationships was never addressed. In the end, the Center failed to provide help to those students who needed us the most.

For example, during my first semester directing the Center, I discovered many of the tutors who, due to their academic training and success, viewed Standard English as their "language," forgetting that they also had to struggle, at one time, to

acquire it. One tutor expressed her dismay about a client's inability to use Standard English in a note to me. She wrote:

> One of my clients in particular really bothers me. We work and work and work, but it seems that nothing really gets through to him. He is not stupid. In fact, he's far from stupid. He just plain does not care. Couple that with the fact that he does not speak English that I can understand. And that's another thing. How in the world are we supposed to deal with people who are supposed to be speaking the same language as we are, but really are speaking something totally different. I feel we should value the different dialects of English, but it makes communication incredibly difficult. Maybe I'm too stuck in the traditional grammar, but it bothers me when I hear college students say "wif" for with, "baffroom" for bathroom, and "axe" for ask. Maybe I'm wrong for being bothered by this, but I honestly think this sounds like bad English. But back to my original point, my client thinks reading is just something he has to do because it's for a class. I cannot motivate this person. Not only do I not speak his language, but I cannot get him to read critically or to write in his own voice.

I chose this note to discuss because I wanted to talk about the tension and contradictions that are apparent in it. Here is a situation where the tutor acknowledges that a client is not "stupid," but she does fault him for what she perceives to be his lack of responsibility. Consider though that she has stated that they "work and work and work"—not the response you would expect from a student who is not concerned with his studies. What really may be the cause of the tutor's perception that this client does not care is his use of black English.

While on one level this tutor is savvy enough to know that "we should value the different dialects of English," she is still bothered by this particular dialect.

The tutor obviously wants to help this client, hence the note to me, but she is stymied by her perceptions of his attitude. After giving more than needed examples of his "mispronunciation" of several words, she states that he "thinks reading is just something he has to do because it's for a class." Well, as most teachers are quite aware, this attitude is shared by many students, even those who scored in the top percentile in standardized tests. But I am concerned with how her conception of him as a learner is influencing their work together. It is obvious that they are not peers— as the tutor argues, she "does not speak his language." And the client cannot be receiving too much help, despite his hard work with the tutor. Just think of how difficult it would be to be asked to write in your "own voice" at the same time you are be asked to stop using the language you know the best. Because the tutor has advanced standing in a discourse community, she knows, even if it is now internalized knowledge, that when one writes in one's "own voice" one uses Standard English, particularly if one is still a student. Unfortunately, the client does not yet know that fact and is still struggling to obtain both the necessary knowledge and vocabulary to enter into a conversation with which the tutor is already very familiar. For both client and tutor, this type of interaction is frustrating and nonproductive.

In the new tutor training course, we work to increase the tutors' awareness of difference and to help student tutors understand their place in certain social and historical contexts—a process which enables them to begin understanding how their contexts may differ from their clients. It is our goal that tutors comprehend that difference should not be understood as being either good or bad. To truly open up our community of writers to entering students, tutors must be aware that they do hold more privileged positions and they speak from that position; it does not mean they are "better" than clients, rather it signifies a subjective viewpoint. Tutors need to understand that cultural perceptions of difference influence everything from

schema theories to scientific "fact", and for that reason almost everything is controlled by a bias which is accepted as normal, or worse yet as natural.

To help us to achieve this goal, we start by acknowledging that tutors are advanced members of a discourse community. In order to aid tutors in understanding their place within this community, Peter Elbow's *What is English?* is used as a core text; this text was selected because of the multiple voices that speak from its pages, voices that speak of the conflicts within our field and their struggles to teach and learn within an imperfect system. Each week of the ten week course, we read selections from *What is English?* and a selected article, adding voice upon voice. For instance, if someone from the book mentions tracking, we read an article about tracking. If a selection deals with inequality in education, we read a piece about that subject as well. This method allows, for the first time, many of our tutors to enter into the conversations that have been carried on above and about them, conversations from which they too have been excluded. And like the people in Elbow's book and in our own conversations with colleagues, the tutors are given a chance to explore and express their views concerning current academic debates.

Each week, tutors are required to read the selections and to write at least one page in a response journal, although they often write much more. Many of the best class discussions come from the pages of these journals. The tutors quickly discovers the differences that exist among each other, and memories of their own struggles in school, problems they had "learning" new subjects, come back to them. One tutor wrote about her realization that her school experiences were not universal ones. She stated:

> My parents graduated from college, I attended schools that were typically suburban/midwestern, and I now am in an environment not unlike the ones I already know and one in which I expected to be at this point in time. "Naturally," I have been comfortable using

> Standard English. Can I claim an inherent, natural talent for writing? No. But I use to think that the hick with the twang and those funny sayings in my English class was a little slow, and it was no wonder that she couldn't write well. Only smart people speak correctly. Listening to my colleagues and to my clients, I now realize that I felt that way because the standard coincides with my own style of speaking.

Now when we talk to tutors about "good" listening skills, we also talk about what it is we are hearing or think we are hearing.

And we work on finding strategies that will enable tutors and clients to work together. One article we read "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children" by Lisa Delpit, inspired several weeks of serious debate among the tutors. In the article, Delpit argues that "teachers must teach all students the explicit and implicit rules of power as a step toward a more just society." Delpit brings issues of privilege and power to the forefront and does not allow readers to ignore their place in or role of maintaining the hierarchies of power, especially those concerning educational systems. My tutors felt this article "got in their face." For the first time, feelings of guilt and anger were openly spoken about in the class. Once we got past "confronting" our guilty and angry feelings, the class was able to make use of the valuable advice Delpit offers.

On many occasions, we had talked about how to help clients learn Standard English while not becoming bogged down on grammar lectures. I did not want the tutoring sessions to become an hour of rote and drill instruction, where the content of the client's writing was ignored. Instead, with the help of Delpit's article, we developed the Writing Center mini-lesson, a concept with which many teachers are already familiar, but something new to the tutors. To aid the client in becoming more accustomed to expected usage, the tutor spends five minutes at the

start of a session reviewing or discussing one rule or guideline, generally a brief handout is also given to the client. What is going to be discussed can be mutually agreed upon by client and tutor, but after the five minutes is up, they are expected to work on the client's actual written piece. In this manner, clients are not deprived of needed knowledge and the tutor does not fall into the trap of spending an hour talking about common splices.

I will conclude by handing out a copy of the syllabus used in our new training course. As with many things of this nature, we are still refining the course. It was taught for the first time last spring, and will not be taught again until late this spring. In the time in between, I have continued to read new material and to talk to tutors, clients, and colleagues about strategies and issues. Last spring's pilot course yielded good results—this fall, the Writing Center was up almost 500% in client visitations. While I would never claim that we have found *the* solution, I do believe that we have found a better one. By conceiving of the Writing center as a discourse community, we have been able to examine what it is that makes it one and our own roles within it.

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